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ABSTRACT

There is a convergence of research evidence pointing to the critical role good phonics decoding skills play in good reading; however, there is no convergence in the research on precise development of reading strategies or on types, intensity, or duration of appropriate phonics instruction. Five unscientific assertions are often cited in phonics legislation and other materials, including: (1) No one teaches phonics; (2) There is a phonemic awareness crisis; (3) Direct, systematic phonics is the only feasible method; (4) Decodable texts are important; and (5) "There is another sucker born every minute." More research needs to be conducted in evaluation of instruction and of the effects of curriculum materials. (EF)

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Overselling Phonics

Richard L. Allington

Paraphrasing Ronald Reagan, "Here we go again!" with a rancorous public debate over beginning reading instruction. Once again there are claims being made for the effectiveness of code-oriented, or phonics, approaches and once again some folks are overstating, exaggerating, and maybe even creating evidence to support code-oriented materials and methods. I will suggest that there is a convergence of research evidence pointing to the critical role good decoding skills play in good reading. However, I will also suggest that there is no convergence in the research on just how school programs might best foster development of such strategies and no credible and compelling evidence indicating what types of phonics instruction, of what intensity, over what duration will produce the largest numbers of children who read well and willingly.

But this lack of evidence seems not to much matter to many proponents of a pro-phonics agenda (and I include here some researchers, publishers, legislators, lobbyists, journalists

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and others). Lobbying material, state education agency documents, product advertisements, legislative testimonies, and various other materials have recently begun to contain a set of strikingly similar assertions about phonics teaching and learning--assertions that are simply distortions of the available research even though often couched in terms such as "scientifically rigorous research". Four common unscientific assertions have appeared repeatedly and each is discussed below (by unscientific I mean assertions that cannot be drawn from the available scientific evidence) and a fifth unscientific assertion has not been much discussed but should be. It, too, is offered below.

Unscientific assertion #1. No one teaches phonics.

There is a plethora of research that reports that virtually all primary grade teachers do teach phonics, usually daily. Three large-scale federally funded studies appeared in the past year (by Jim Baumann and colleagues at the National Reading Research Center at the University of Georgia, by Jim Hoffman and colleagues at the University of Texas - Austin, and by Mike Pressley and colleagues at the National Research Center for English Learning and Achievement at the University at Albany) that provide overwhelming evidence that phonics instruction is still very much a part of teaching children to read. Smaller, more intensive studies of exemplary teachers point to the same conclusion but also point to an interesting phenomenon ‹ these exemplary teachers rarely report using a commercial phonics curriculum material. Instead, they teach phonics knowledge and strategies to children rather than teaching the pages in a phonics workbook.

In addition, content analyses of available reading series (by Hoffmann and colleagues) report that phonics lessons are still part and parcel of these basal readers ‹ even the literature-based series. Some supplementary materials have no phonics components (just as some phonics materials have no stories to read) but the mainline basal series that the majority of teachers still use, continue to include phonics lessons.

I find it odd that so many folks who want to drape their pronouncements with a "scientific research" endorsement would find it so easy to ignore such an accumulation of evidence ‹ of course, the data contradict an assertion that is fundamental to their advocacy for the wider use of more code-oriented materials and methods.

Unscientific assertion #2. There is a phonemic awareness crisis.

Recently, a new wrinkle has been added to the advocacy campaign ‹ a crisis in phonemic awareness. Oversimplifying a bit, phonemic awareness is the ability to isolate individual sounds (phonemes) in spoken words. For instance, being able to count three sounds in "cat". The evidence indicates that even lots of traditional phonics instruction offers little benefit for children who have not developed phonemic awareness. Thus, I think there is a compelling convergence in the research to support the conclusion that phonemic awareness is an important understanding in learning to read an alphabetic language like English. But there is also a convergence of evidence that indicates that most (80-85%) children already acquire phonemic awareness by the middle of first grade. Since the

1970s there is also a steady trend in the research pointing to 15-20% of children who generally fail to acquire phonemic awareness without some additional intervention.

But the research also indicates that 2 of those 3-4 children in each classroom that don't get it initially can develop phonemic awareness within a few weeks if offered some targeted small group intervention. The remaining children may require a more intensive intervention, a targeted tutorial like Reading Recovery, for instance. Perhaps classroom instruction can be modified so fewer children fail to acquire phonemic awareness. Alternatively, small group and tutorial interventions might be offered for children experiencing this particular learning difficulty (in fact there is a substantial body of research that would support such add-on interventions).

So, we have learned much from the research about the importance of children developing phonemic awareness but the research still offers no clear basis for advocating particular instructional materials or methods. It remains unclear whether classroom-based curriculum adaptations can be recommended as the most efficient strategy for addressing the problems experienced by a small group of children in the classrooms we have.

Unscientific assertion #3. Direct, systematic phonics is the only way to go.

There is suddenly much ado about the need to ensure that "direct, systematic" phonics instruction is offered. Often "incidental, opportunistic" phonics instruction is contrasted negatively against the "scientific" assertions for "direct, systematic" phonics. The problem is that the available studies of exemplary teachers portray powerful phonics instruction that is "direct and opportunistic" (and it seems systematic also). It seems obvious that well planned instruction based on student needs would be more effective than a series of random instructional activities. But exactly what sort "direct, systematic", or "direct, opportunistic" phonics instruction does the research endorse?

Simply said, there is no convergence of research on just what sort of phonics instruction should be offered. Often publishers of commercial materials seem to be suggesting that their material has been developed from some set of "scientific" principles, principles that suggest there is a convergence of research evidence on just what order letters and sounds should be taught and whether the instruction should focus on synthetic or analytic approaches and so on. But there simply is no convergence of research on such points. There is no "scientifically" determined sequence of instruction and no conclusive evidence on what sorts of phonics lessons, of what duration would most effectively develop the optimum level of decoding efficiency in children.

It is important that children develop effective and efficient strategies for pronouncing unknown words. But appeals to the research for just how to best accomplish this feat

should be met with a stony silence or, perhaps, an "It all depends...". Jeanne Chall, in her classic book, Reading: The great debate, noted that good teachers have always responded to children's needs and offered varying levels of varying sorts of phonics instruction. She notes that many teachers have developed instructional routines that are far more powerful than any developed by researchers or marketed by publishers. She suggests that we might do well to learn from these teachers. Marilyn Adams, in her book, Beginning to read, a review of the research on phonics instruction, notes, "The basic phonics curriculum is inherently intractable, slow, inefficient, and worse: Except for students who essentially know how to read before it is begun, it is also likely to be ineffective". All of this suggests a) developing effective decoding instruction is possible and necessary, b) traditional phonics curriculum materials rarely, if ever, reflect what we know about effective decoding instruction, and c) there is no sufficient evidence to mandate any particular method or materials.

Unscientific assertion #4. Decodable texts are important.

Finally, the most recent touted unscientific assertion has to do with role of, or need for, "decodable texts". Such texts are described as offering children only words that they have been taught the phonics skills to sound out. The decodable texts displayed at the recent meeting of the International Reading Association reminded me of nothing so much as the 1960s "Nan can fan Dan." and "Nat the Rat" readers. I will submit that there exists not a single well-designed study that supports the exclusive use of decodable texts in beginning reading (or any reading instruction). I have spent the better part of the last six

weeks examining a number of studies that were suggested as supporting a recommendation for use of decodable texts. None of the recommended studies offer support for the recommendation. None.

In fact, there is evidence that restricting beginning reading materials to any single text type will likely produce a limited set of reading strategies ‹ though the strategies developed seem to vary by the type of text restrictions in place. There is research support for providing children with "manageable" texts ‹ texts that they can read without too much difficulty. There is also evidence that some of the recently published reading series provide reading material that is quite difficult. But none of this suggests that a return to "Nat the Cat." is the solution.

Unscientific assertion #5. There is another sucker born every minute.

This is my assertion and it is unscientific but long-lived in American folklore. The basis for the assertion sits astride the evidence that Americans are often easily misled into parting with their money. I will suggest that evidence for this assertion may be gathered in various legislative venues, school district board meeting rooms, and editorial offices. All it seems to take is for someone with some disposable income (and, ideally, someone with the appropriate station in life) to tout the message and lots of folks can be convinced that "research says..." even when research says nothing of sort. Perhaps this is an indication that all of us should be more concerned with developing critical readers rather than just focusing on developing rapid decoders.

What to do?

It would be useful if even 5% of the school districts evaluated the effects of the instruction offered in their schools and the effects of selected curriculum materials on that instruction. It would be useful if state and federal education agencies routinely funded such evaluation studies and even more so if they provided technical assistance to ensure well-designed studies were conducted. It would be useful if the results of such studies were aggregated and made public. But, Bob Slavin made a similar argument a decade ago and there has been literally no action on his proposal even though hundreds of millions of dollars have been since invested in materials and training of various sorts and we are now perched on the brink of investing hundreds of millions more, so I don't actually expect that much will come of my recommendation either. In the meantime, then, beginning reading materials and methods will remain a domain populated with hucksters, charlatans, and outright liars and it will be up to individuals to sort out wheat from the chaff, the exaggerations from viable research generalizations, and the hope from the hype.

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